A. Rhetorical Questions. The two hallmarks of rhetorical questions (RhQ) such as (1) and (2) are that (i) despite their interrogative form the questioner does not expect an answer, and (ii) that they have a ‘feel’ of an assertion. Researchers have proposed that RhQs are negative statements ([17, 18, 14, 11, 10]), interrogatives with no answers ([12, 9]) or just ordinary questions that impose restrictions on what answer they allow ([16]). In this paper we follow [3] in taking rhetorical questions to be special in how their (ordinary) interrogative semantics relates to the pragmatics. On [3]’s proposal, RhQs are questions whose answer is already part of the Common Ground (CG) and, hence, an answer is not expected (because it can be inferred) and the question feels like an assertion because the asker publicly commits to a single proposition in the CG.

(1) Am I a nerd or am I a nerd? \[ \text{Implies: S is a nerd.} \]

(2) Are you evaluating this abstract or reading a mystery short story? \[ \text{Implies: H is supposed to be evaluating the abstract.} \]

A third hallmark motivating [3]’s analysis is that RhQs can optionally be answered, even when the answer is semantically presupposed as in (1): a hearer could respond with, ‘yeah, you’re a nerd’.

Proposal. We propose that rhetorical questions are questions that signal that their answer is already Common Ground (following [3] and much earlier literature), but specifically where this answer lacks commitments on the part of any discourse participants. A main function of a rhetorical question is to obtain an addressee’s public commitment. The reasons for obtaining a public commitment are varied, ranging from expressing frustration, trying to force a hearer to agree with something, or simply drawing attention [4]. We further propose that the dynamics of RhQs can be explained once we differentiate the effect of inducing a partition in the context set (questioning) from the act of introducing a new discourse topic/QUD (asking). In particular, we suggest that questions are proposals to update the context with a new topic (in the sense of [5]), and that for information-seeking questions the result of accepting such a proposal (which often happens implicitly) is to partition the context set ([7] a.o). For RhQs, the result of accepting such a proposal is rather to simply contribute a commitment to the presupposed answer, with a non-inquisitive context. Rhetorical questions are trivial in their questioning effect, but are not trivial at the proposal stage. Our analysis captures the three ‘hallmarks’ above as well as several new facts we introduce here: (i) that adversarial rhetorical questions like (2) are intended to extract an acknowledgement, (ii) that CG-status is not itself sufficient, and (iii) that overt commitments block rhetorical readings.

B. When are interrogatives RhQs? That the answer is publicly known by all participants is not enough to classify a question as a RhQ. Case 1: Imagine an exam scenario, with an A+ student writing a test and having talked about the material with the professor during office hours. Both the answers and the fact that the professor and student both know the answers are common ground, and yet the test is not understood as a collection of RhQs. Case 2 involves an explicit prior statement of the answer by the addressee, after which an attempt at a rhetorical question is simply infelicitous.

(3) A: Oh!, look at the map! Strasbourg is in France not in Germany!
B: (with neutral information-seeking intonation) \# What country is Strasbourg in?

(4) (Following an earlier debate, B finds a map) B: See, look! What country is Strasbourg in?

Speakers’ intuitions for (3) are that B’s utterance in (3) is infelicitous because B is signaling ignorance of the answer; but when the answer is salient and not yet part of the conversation in (4), a rhetorical reading is fine. It is therefore not a sufficient condition that the answer be contextually entailed, in order to get a rhetorical interpretation. The \# in this case cannot even be obviated by the special prosodic patterns frequently found in RhQs. This simple fact is surprising on many pragmatic accounts of RhQs, since A’s utterance would seem to set up the exact preconditions.

The correct sufficient condition is not just a CG constraint. An interrogative is interpreted as a
RhQ only if the speaker conveys linguistically that the answer is inferrable to or already believed by the addressee, and non-controversial relative to the common ground, but that there are no public commitments to the answer by any discourse participant. RhQs are felicitous in a discourse in which the parallel assertion would be felicitous in the first place.

C. RhQs are not assertions: The discourse effect of uttering a question with a rhetorical reading is not that of an assertion (in the Stalnakerian sense). We can see this by observing the response patterns (example adapted from [3]).

(5) A: You should stop saying that Luca didn’t like the party last night. After all, who was the only one that was still dancing at 3am?
   B: You are right. Luca. // B’: #That’s true. Luca.

D. Severing questioning from asking. The puzzle of rhetorical question is how exactly they convey information, despite not being assertions. Our proposal is to account for this by differentiating the step of asking a question – which we take to be a proposal to update the discourse topic/QUD stack with a particular question – and questioning, partitioning a context relative to the answer space. Treating assertions as proposals to update, rather than direct updates, has been motivated at length by [5, 6, 13]. A similar idea for imperatives has been recently developed by [19].

It is therefore unsurprising on general principles that this move would be needed for questions, and the move sheds particular light on the dynamics of rhetorical questions. Though we do not develop the details in this abstract, we formalize this proposal in an update semantics based on [5, 2].

Consider the rhetorical alternative question in (1). On many treatments of alternative questions (e.g. [1]) this interrogative would denote a singleton alternative set or equivalent inquisitive representation, \( \{ \lambda w, s. s.e \text{ is a nerd in } w \} \), while at the same time presupposing that its denotation exhausts the space of possibilities. The net result is a question-meaning that is trivial – can never be used to allow a choice of distinct answers. Asking this question proposes to make this singleton alternative set the discourse topic (/QUD: Question Under Discussion [15]). Any context where it is appropriate to accept this as a topic must exclude worlds where the presupposition is not satisfied, leading to a necessary rhetorical interpretation. However, at the proposal stage, the question is not ‘asked’. It is simply, in Farkas and Bruce’s terminology, on the Table – in a limbo state waiting for a response. A speaker could resist or reject the proposal, but in this case the more straightforward response would be to accept the topic. (To actually reject the implied claim for this species of question, the hearer would have to argue with the presupposition.) Accepting the proposal then raises the question, but the questioning step is trivial, and so does not result in an inquisitive context. In general, if utterring an interrogative clause involves proposing to update the QUD, then one way (but not the only way) of accepting is by giving an answer – but for a question like (1) there is only one answer to give. Alternatively, even a minimal acceptance move like ‘ok’ provides a commitment on the part of the responder that the trivial answer is common ground. (In [8]’s terminology, this would be a ‘contingent commitment’.)

Since proposals must always be addressed unless the hearer completely opts out of communication, a rhetorical question is difficult to respond to without some kind of acknowledgment of the implied answer as common ground, and therefore we derive the effect of rhetorical questions requesting a public commitment. A prior public commitment (but not necessarily just public mutual knowledge) is also expected to block rhetorical questions.

Conclusion. Divorcing the immediate discourse function from the resulting update for interrogatives leads to a unified account of rhetorical and non-rhetorical questions, providing further evidence for a view of discourse where speech acts are proposals for updating the common ground.
Selected References


